

## Performativity, border-crossings and ethics in a prison-based creative writing class

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## **Performativity, border-crossings and ethics in a prison-based creative writing project**

### **Introduction: Why research creative writing workshops in a men's prison?**

This article engages in critical reflection on our experiences as participant researchers in a prison-based creative writing class. We argue that this participation generated important and beneficial knowledge and insight that we otherwise would not have had. We conceptualise our researcher participation in two ways: the performance of gender as women researchers in a male prison and as border crossing in terms of transgressing the boundary between researcher and participant.

This article's insights on performativity and symbolic border crossing derive from a project, *Writing Lives*, carried out in the library of a medium security men's prison, and funded through the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF). It was developed by colleagues from the departments of Sociology, Education, and English at the University of XXXX and was delivered in partnership with an independent creative writing consultant, the prison, the local council library service, and the Mass Observation Archive. The study explored the subjectively experienced benefits for prisoners of participating in creative writing workshops. Prison population literacy levels are substantially below average, limiting life chances upon release – half of the prison population has a reading age below that expected of an eleven year old (Clarke and Dugdale, 2008). Alongside increased literacy, we aimed to explore wider benefits, including potential for developing understanding of self and the world through reading, writing and sharing; the experience of informal peer-to-peer support through workshops; increasing self-confidence and well-being (Nugent and Louckes, 2011); and even the ability to envisage different lives (Spargo and Priest, 2014). This wide conceptualisation of possible benefits of participating in an arts-based programme offers contribution to strategies for supporting rehabilitation (McNeill et al., 2011; Bilby et al., 2013). As a small study, the project was exploratory but sought to examine both how creative self-

expression could be beneficial for participants and how writing enables further understanding of lives and subjectivities.

Four creative writing workshops each three-hours duration were held in June-July 2014. Prisoners signed-up voluntarily for the workshop series, publicised beforehand via posters in the library. Workshops were attended by a core group of 8-10 inmates. Numbers fluctuated slightly due to the exigencies of prison life, meaning that some men could only attend one or two workshops because for example they were discharged from prison, or required to attend alternative activities. The only knowledge that we as researchers had of prisoners was what they chose to disclose about personal lives and events leading to incarceration. Information including age, sentence length, educational and occupational background was often not known; pseudonyms are used to protect participant anonymity.

Workshops were led by an independent creative writing consultant in conjunction with the academic researchers, participating in workshop activities alongside prisoners. Prior to workshops, the researchers selected evocative materials from the Mass Observation Archive to lead creative writing exercises; these related to four themes – time, belonging, letters and diaries. The creative writing consultant read document extracts aloud, in structured exercises beginning with freewriting as prompts to elicit prisoners' subjective written reflections on their everyday lives.<sup>1</sup>

The final session included focus group evaluation of experiences of participating in the project. This reflective discussion included not-only prisoners but also the prison librarian, creative writing consultant, and one of the academic researchers. Selected writings from the workshop participants (including the librarian and consultant) were published as an anthology. A launch event was held in September 2014 to which the prisoners' families, as well as the prison governor, criminal justice agencies, and representatives from voluntary organisations representing prisoners and their families, such as Clinks, were invited to

attend. Following the success of the project, the creative writing consultant was offered a six-month writer-in-residency position at the prison.

Formal ethical approval to carry out the research was received from the Social Sciences and Arts Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee at University of XXXX. We gave participants an information sheet and asked them to sign a consent form. These materials explained that their writing from the workshops, and discussions in the evaluation focus group, would contribute to the research and potentially be quoted in future publications after being anonymised. The information sheet also explained that, with participants' permission, selected writing would be included in a short publication and read out at a public event. The consent form made it clear that participation in the workshops was not conditional on agreeing to allow us to include the creative writing in the study, or on participation in the evaluation focus group. Who we were, the aims of the project, the nature of the Mass Observation Archive and issues relating to participation were also addressed verbally in the first workshop and in subsequent conversations with participants.

An important aspect of our experience of this research, as discussed later in this article, is recognition of the shortcomings of merely fulfilling procedural ethical requirements for understanding the ethical complexity of such research in practice. Giving consent in the context of incarceration is clearly ambiguous (Fujii, 2012). Further, many prisoners suffer from traumatic and emotionally complex issues (Mills and Kendall, 2016) and workshops had potential to raise these. Prison provides inadequate support for emotional well-being, limiting potential to arrange or signpost follow-up support for participants. One resource for prisoners is the presence of Samaritans volunteer 'listeners' operating from the prison library; contributing to the appropriateness of this space as the location for our workshops. Prisoners' accounts also identified tangible benefits of participating to include development of independent writing as a self-protective strategy in a context lacking formal mechanisms for emotional support.

This article explores performative gendered dimensions of doing research as participants, particularly as the ‘non-inmates’ involved were all women; and issues associated with us as researchers ‘crossing boundaries’ to participate in the workshops alongside prisoners, including important ethical considerations.

## **Researcher reflexivity and dramaturgical dilemmas**

### ***Participatory principles***

We do not class our methodology as participatory research as, partly due to the strictures of imprisonment, participants did not contribute to designing or leading workshops; but we do class it as emancipatory, in that we were attentive to power relations, engaged in reflexivity and intended participation to be empowering (Higginbotham and Liamputtong, 2015). We saw the workshop approach as able to foster personal reflection and provide a discursive space to empower marginalised voices as collective co-creators of knowledge (Leavy, 2009). Following participatory research’s imperative to reduce distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Pain, 2004), this was vital to maximising the democracy of the research transaction and negotiating the multiply-layered power relations of intersectional identity between researchers and participants. While the extent of this process was partly unanticipated, onus on a collaborative approach to generating empirical evidence and the importance of participant voice were methodologically central to our perspectives as feminist gender researchers. Our research was with men, but we drew on principles derived from feminist methodologies (see Stanley and Wise, 1993; Childers et al., 2013). We sought to actively avoid the tendency in some mainstream gender research identified by postcolonial feminists toward positioning of ‘feminist as tourist’ (Mohanty, 2003, 518), whereby the researched are not understood in relation to their everyday lives, but only in stereotypical terms. Participatory arts research influenced our methodological approach in that workshops were intended to foster ‘spaces of self-representation and articulation’ (Herman and Mattingly, 1999: 210).

### ***Collaboration and co-construction of knowledge***

Participating fully in workshops afforded us opportunity to pursue co-construction of knowledge in line with the metaphor of researcher as 'traveller' rather than tourist, 'wandering together with' participants in the process of arriving at insight (Kvale, 2007: 19). This allowed prisoner participants to be not only actor, but also author (MacIntyre, 2007). As such, the research was in keeping with the approach that has grown out of Symbolic Interactionism, of the negotiation and construction of research meaning taking place between researcher and participant as actors in the process (Silverman, 2001; Atkinson and Coffey, 2003). This closeness to participants and fluidity of research relationships allowed for the approach espoused by Trinh Minh-ha of speaking next to, as opposed to speaking for, marginalised groups (Chen, 1992).

These aspirations have implications for researcher reflexivity. Scott et al. (2012: 716) have noted a 'flurry of reflexive, confessional tales about experiences in the field'. This work was however distinctive in the direct participation by researchers alongside participants in the context of a structured formal learning environment. That there were others quite separate to the core academic research team involved in workshop facilitation (the prison librarian and creative writing leader) contributed to prisoners' perception that they and the researchers were participating in workshops together 'as interacting bodies, sharing time and space' (O'Neill, 2012: 179). Denzin (1970) has referred to 'the research act' as a carefully choreographed performance; but in the workshops we as researchers were not the choreographers of the performance, diminishing the tools at our disposal in terms of spontaneously improvising. As such the research experience represented the sharp end of the 'precarious theatricality' of face-to-face qualitative methods (Atkinson and Coffey 2003; Hermanns 2004; Scott et al. 2012), engendering an awareness of our vulnerability to making mistakes (Denzin 1970). To maintain the integrity of the project, we as researchers had to stay in role as workshop participants, as the creative writing facilitator led the activities. For

us not to have fully joined in any activities would have undermined both the research relationships that we had worked to develop, and the integrity of the democratic experience that we had sought to encourage, whereby participants could see us participating alongside them.

The vulnerabilities of workshop participants emerged so acutely that to maintain cool researcher detachment would have felt disingenuous. This resonates with Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) work on the importance not only of procedural ethics as neatly defined in requirements of institutions and professional regulatory bodies, but also ongoing reflexive decisions around ethics in practice that must be made in response to real life dilemmas as part of research. Researcher fieldnotes recorded awareness that we 'didn't want them to feel like we were psychoanalysts.' This concern was informed by previous experience on other projects of being 'outed' through introductions by well-meaning individuals to participants that had led to the perception of the 'watching' university researcher with a clipboard (XXXX, 2012).

The methodological approach of participating in workshops alongside prisoners must be acknowledged as a complex interplay of two potentially conflicting goals, pertaining to both the data obtained and the process of obtaining it. This dual motivation for methodological approach relates to our drawing on both Symbolic Interactionist and Feminist frameworks. In line with the former we identify the potential benefits to us as researchers in terms of the data we gather, of participating fully in workshops alongside participants. Our feminist researcher principles however placed us in the uncomfortable situation of wishing to participate fully in workshops because of recognising unequal power relations and attempting to democratise these; but acknowledging that the convenient simultaneous self-interested outcome of securing the data we wanted might outweigh honourable intentions.

Such reflections on the messiness of research process are however perceived positively rather than as a weakness. It casts much-needed attention on how the researcher-self is

practically accomplished (Atkinson and Coffey, 2003) as a role performance, and what this entails for the actor behind the character (Scott et al. 2012). While the research respondent role has been extensively interrogated and typologised, and feminist researchers in particular have theorised the responsibilities of ethical research, much less attention has been paid to the researcher 'as a social actor who is affected by the drama and directly implicated as a protagonist within it' (Scott et al., 2012: 717) and to the associated 'dramaturgical dilemmas' that may emerge. We address not only researcher as social actor, but also as occupying the dual role of participant, and explore how the resulting interactions generated insight.

### ***Gendered experience and feminist perspective***

Being women (and feminist) researchers informed interest in theorising the significance of gender to this process, including male prisoners' experiences of participating in shared creative writing, and theorising from a feminist perspective the dynamics of our gendered embodied identities as researchers and participants in this collective process. Due to our sociological background, we identify concepts of performativity and dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1990, 1993) as relevant to understanding the shared experience of participating in creative writing workshops alongside the prisoners we researched. We draw on Brickell's (2005) conceptualisation of performativity, which synthesises Butler's (1990; 1993) analysis of gender as performative with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis of performance as social interaction. According to this framework, gender is constructed and is an effect of power relations, but individuals are 'reflexive, acting subjects' (Brickell, 2005: 29), who act within 'the context of possibilities permitted within the culture' (31). We apply this understanding of gender performance to ourselves as researchers performing femininity and research participants performing masculinity. We recognise that gender is not necessarily lived or performed as a binary. However, prisons are 'organized around the assumption of a gender binary' (Jenness and Fenstermaker, 2014: 5) and this institutionalised gender segregation is germane to our reflections. We draw on fieldnotes, prisoners' creative writing and evaluation focus group data in the following discussion.



## **Performing gender and emotion in the prison writing workshops**

### ***Gender***

Explicit attention to the embodied gendered experience of prison has conventionally come from women researchers in men's prisons (Jewkes, 2012; Crewe, 2014). Female researchers often find that their bodies become noticeable in male dominated settings (Soyer, 2013), leading to judgements about their dress and manner (see Lin, 2002; Piacentini, 2004). Our own experience was of the significance of gender performance being unavoidable. The fieldnotes of one of the authors recall feeling acutely aware of carefully managing appearance to avoid any overt expressions of 'femininity' or too much bare skin, despite workshops taking place on hot days in in the middle of summer.

One of the most notable things about the workshops was their intensely emotional nature. We reflect that the expression of emotionally vulnerable masculinity that took place between participants, including the supportive validating of emotionality by others in the group, was partly facilitated by workshops being organised, led and attended by women. We performed the normatively feminine role of doing emotional labour (see Hochschild, 1983). Reay (2004) argues that women enact emotional labour more than most men. This labour can be understood as 'maintaining the emotional aspects of family relationships, responding to others' emotional states and also acting to alleviate distress' (p. 59). In this case, emotional labour involved creating a setting in which the men felt able to show vulnerability. As researchers, we participated in sessions but did not lead them. Nevertheless, we chose workshop themes such as 'belonging' that invited emotional responses, and had selected affecting extracts of life writing from the Mass Observation Archive. As participants, we performed femininity and carried out emotional labour through facial expressions, voice tone and sharing our own writing, which also revealed emotional vulnerability. This is an

acceptable, and expected, characteristic of how femininity is constructed, paving the way for men to feel able to adopt emotionally vulnerable masculinity (see Jackson, 1993). This does not suggest that male researchers cannot elicit expressions of vulnerability from other men, but that the gendered dynamics of our workshops were consistent with socially and culturally scripted gender performances. According to these, women are the conduits and repositories for men's 'softer' sides (Bourdieu, 2001). In this case, this encouraged the men to write about the significance of their intimate and family relationships, as we did also as participants ourselves in the writing activities.

The workshops demonstrated Ricciardelli et al.'s (2015: 502) contention that prisoners can 'strategically and fluidly adopt a wide range of masculinities for different situations and relationships'. This emphasises the need to recognise gender performance as agentic and dependent on social interaction (Brickell, 2005). Although hierarchies between the men may have existed in their wider prison lives, we were not aware of these in workshop interactions. Rather, there was a supportive atmosphere in which men encouraged each other to write and to read their work aloud. They also expressed empathy with one another when painful and traumatic experiences were recounted, frequently offering similar experiences of their own. Crewe's (2014) discussion of 'homosocial relations' – same sex social bonds - between prisoners is relevant. Most men in the workshops did not already know one another so had not shared the type of intimacy arising from daily routines that Crewe outlines. However, the homosocial relations of the prison meant that in addition to norms of status derived through toughness, there existed other, more affective ways for men to interact with one another.

Joking and humour emerged as a strategy employed by prisoners in negotiating this precarious terrain of expressing vulnerability in the prison context. After one man read out an evocative poem about the high wall of the prison, and how his life had now stopped at a standstill, another playfully elbowed him, asking 'what you saying? You not having a good time in here? We got to watch a film last night', at which everyone laughed in a friendly way. This resonates with Goffman's (1959) observations of how joking and humour are employed

as strategies for alleviating embarrassment and ‘saving face’ in managing self-presentation, either as defensive practices by affected individuals, or protective practices by sympathetic others. As participants in the group we as researchers became active partners in this supportive community of gentle joking, as such transgressing the usual response repertoire of social science researchers facilitating a focus group situation.

### ***Connecting with emotion through memories***

Freewriting exercises encouraged raw expression of emotionally significant experiences, from the poignant to the traumatic; and the emotionality of the experience emerged explicitly in the end of project focus group feedback discussion as a central feature of workshop participation. One man, Jamie, described letters he sent from prison to his former partner, the mother of his children, reflecting that perhaps he should have torn them up instead. He explained feeling the *need* to write the letters to release the emotions that would sometimes ‘come up’, and feeling better afterwards. The process of writing reflectively appeared to provide a space in which participants could remove the emotional ‘masks’ hiding their vulnerabilities seen as being a demand of prison life (Crewe et al. 2014).

Prison temporally suspends the trajectories of inmates’ lives, interrupting journeys and relationships (Dyer, 2005). Feelings of distance and isolation emerged as salient in prisoners’ creative writing:

The isolation of being inside feels like those dark winter nights when you feel like you don’t want to do anything at all. (Michael)

The distance is the punishment, the things, the people, the life we miss, we long to see again. (Lawrence)

Disconnected from wider lives, memories developed a strong significance. As one man reflected after reading out his writing reminiscing about playing football in the garden with his

son, 'It's memories when you're in here, you've got to feed off to keep you going. And I'm lucky because some men here don't have that.' Another, going home the next day after a two-year stretch, his first ever, stopped to tell XXXX about his children and their ages, and how he felt hearing the music of his youth in the 80s playing on Radio 2. He reflected how fast and yet at once how slowly time passes inside prison.

Much of the emotionality of workshops focused around recalling of memories. Kieran's diary-style writing recalled how feelings in prison of 'A window at last!!' turned to anguish: 'I don't look out of the window any more. It hurts too much with the memories.' A 24 year old from a traveller background had four dead brothers, all buried in Ireland. He wrote about having never been able to visit their graves but desperately wanting to: 'I would like to visit the graves. And I'll always think of them for the rest of my life. God Bless, Boys [sic], and RIP. And Love you forever and ever'. Another young man wrote an (unsent) letter to his mother expressing the effect on him of being put in care at 14, and his attempt to comprehend why she allowed this: 'Sometimes I ask myself can a mum really love a child she does that to? I mean, I know I was hard to deal with...'

These memories of poignant experiences emphasised the importance of men's familial relationships to sense of identity. Writing as fathers, partners, sons and brothers, willingness to share this emotionally exposing writing demonstrated participants' preparedness to show rather than hide vulnerability. As we have emphasised, our roles as both participants and researchers was crucial in helping to elicit these responses, and we too engaged in writing around our own memories and vulnerabilities. In the evaluation focus group, Bill explained how writing 'stirs up a lot of emotions' and that it 'upset me a little bit. I controlled myself, I think the first thing I was reading out to you, I welled up a bit'. Prison research tends to neglect male prisoners' 'feminised' characteristics including empathy, caring, parenting and fragility; instead focusing on violence and aggression, the components of excessive masculinity (Ricciardelli et al., 2015). Prison masculinities 'are temporal, malleable and particularly contingent on local prison environments' (p. 493). Although male prisoners may

frequently need to exhibit toughness, their masculinity is also constituted through emotional vulnerability caused by separation from family and friends. Crewe (2014: 397) identifies lack of attention in prison research to 'the interior emotional worlds of male prisoners or to the underlying affective dynamic between them'. While direct admission of vulnerability can leave male prisoners open to ridicule, they develop bonds and closeness together borne out of shared routines of everyday life. These include the mundane intimacies of watching television and making tea. Through actively participating in such emotional sharing, we too as researchers felt that we formed more of a connection with participants than we have in other qualitative, face-to-face research experiences.

Prison library staff provided biscuits for the workshops, with tea or coffee in ceramic mugs. This was significant because ordinarily, prisoners were only allowed plastic mugs. 'Real' mugs communicated the workshop space as diverging from the rest of the prison and entailing a slight loosening of control. Crewe et al. (2014) note how the provision in prison classrooms of minor treats such as biscuits symbolises care and helps to nurture an alternative emotional climate. In our study, library staff taking prisoners' orders for tea and coffee not only symbolised care, but also enacted a small reversal of usual prison practice, whereby inmates perform tasks such as making tea for staff or visitors.

### **Space**

The gendered performances and emotional labour of the researchers, creative writing consultant and prison librarian were not the only reason for the affective nature of the workshops. The 'emotional geography' of the prison library was also deeply significant. Space is the outcome of social practices, including feelings and emotions (Moran, 2013). The emotional geography of the prison library refers to the feelings that people have 'of, in and about it' (p. 184). Prisons have different 'emotion zones' in which 'emotional displays are more or less possible to experience and exhibit' (Crewe et al., 2014: 57). Rather than governed by a single set of rules, emotional display in prison is 'complex and spatially differentiated' (p. 59).

Although many areas of the prison, such as the wings, may require projection of a tough facade, or the suppression of fear, pain and weakness, there are intermediate zones ‘permitting a broader emotional register’ (p. 67). These include classrooms, the chapel and visiting rooms – and we would add, the library. Such spaces are less ‘prison-like’ and are therefore liminal (Moran, 2013). Crewe et al. (2014: 67) describe how classrooms enable an ‘alternative emotional climate’ in which kindness, generosity, warmth and support are possible. One participant, Jackson, described in the evaluation focus group how ‘at the beginning, when Bill [another participant] was writing things and he got very upset, it was nice to see how everyone understood, and all that support’.

The place of the prison library, and the writing workshops for men who participated in them, can be seen as central to survival of this inhospitable environment and its assault on the individual as described by workshop participants in this study. This exemplifies Goffman’s (1961: 68) observation of how

every total institution can be seen as a kind of dead sea in which little islands of vivid encapturing activity appear. Such activity can help the individual withstand the psychological stress usually engendered by assaults upon the self.

In this project, the ‘alternative emotional climate’ of the prison library was essential to enabling participation for all in the writing workshops that we explore, and to the findings in relation to the significance of memory and masculinity. We now turn to transgression of boundaries through being researcher participants and implications for the researcher role and ethics.

## **Transgressing boundaries**

### ***Effects of transgressing boundaries***

We have argued constructions and intersections of femininity and masculinity, researcher and participant, free and imprisoned, as pivotal to framing encounters in this study; these boundaries did not hold fast, but were rather susceptible to being breached. As feminist researchers with previous experience researching marginalised groups including some, like teenage and lone parents (XXXX, 2012; XXXX, 2015), with whom we felt some personal identification, the parameters of this boundary between researcher and researched felt more leaky than it may for some researchers. The relational dynamics created by this particular discursive space nevertheless rendered a clear sense of having strayed further from any such neat containment of distinct roles. This had significant advantages but was also demanding and emotionally exposing.

We had set out as part of the study's aims to develop opportunities for prisoners' self-expression. Our willingness to share, be authentic and vulnerable contributed centrally to building trust and the environment in which workshop participants candidly shared experiences. It also resonated with observation of the role in prisoners' lives of civilian staff who 'disclosed more about their lives than they were strictly allowed, binding prisoners into a contract of mutual candour and humanity that they then met with each other' (Crewe et al. 2014: 14). Not knowing the crimes for which prisoners were detained initially evoked reticence about being around them and being friendly, but with time this anonymity afforded the opportunity to develop relationships of empathy without judgement. Exemplifying the leakages of emotional expression that take place in some zones of the prison which cannot be expressed elsewhere (Crewe et al., 2014), the rawness of participants' experiences seeped in through the chink in daily prison routine that the workshops afforded.

The experience of actively participating in writing and discussion alongside prisoners in workshops, as they managed their daily lives and anxieties as best they could within the constraints of the prison regime, evoked strong emotional responses in us as researchers. These transgressed traditional expectations of the clearly defined boundaries in the interaction between professional researchers and participants (see Stanton, 2014 on the

productive aspects of border crossing in research). Yet the workshop approach of identifying topics on which all participants (including us) were asked to write without censoring and then to read aloud, left us exposed, without the usual advance preparedness offering us an advantage compared to the participants in both our research and teaching. Stripped of the familiar opportunity to censor our responses to present a measured performance as the professional academic, we found ourselves, like the workshop participants, writing about personal and family experiences that evoked emotional responses in us. XXXX found that she unexpectedly poured out emotions related to fearing that she was experiencing a miscarriage when in the first few weeks of pregnancy. This crossing of boundaries in terms of relationships and emotionality was not restricted to the research team; a member of prison staff who participated in the workshops cried in one session when sharing their writing about the death of a family member. As the group took turns to read out their writing, there was little time to reflect on whether or not to share, and certainly no opportunity to confer on this. As one prisoner reflected during a session, 'the sharing's the hard bit'; to which everyone agreed, prisoners, staff and researchers alike.

The research experience brought us self-consciously outside our comfort zones, particularly in the early stages of the research, evoking on numerous occasions the feeling of being 'at sea' (Ruch, 2014: 532) or 'betwixt and between' the margins of 'different social worlds' (Edwards and Ribbens 1998: 2). It was constantly necessary in workshops to think on our feet how much to disclose to protect the integrity and democracy of the process while maintaining awareness of the risk of muddying the water in terms of participants' input. This represents the acknowledged epistemological and ethical concern of 'how to deal with our positions as both knowing subjects and objects of knowledge, insofar as this enables us to access shared experiences' (Scott et al. 2012: 715). For example after one researcher described having had young children to care for since becoming a teenage parent twenty years ago, one prisoner responded that hearing this had changed his view on the angry writing he had just read out about his ex-partner, causing him to reflect on new



understanding of her perspective. Such transgressions of distinct research roles represent dilemmas of occupational identity (Wellin and Fine 2007), threatening the boundaries of the carefully constructed, managed and performed academic identities in which we learn not to mention aspects of experience. However, this boundary crossing was crucial to facilitating the prisoners' performance of vulnerable masculinities discussed earlier. It also represented what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) have referred to as:

“ethically important moments”, where the approach taken or the decision made has important ethical ramifications, but where the researcher does not necessarily feel himself or herself to be on the horns of a dilemma’ (2004, 265).

There was a clear reciprocal impact between researchers and participants that transgresses ideals for research practice as conceptualised by many commentators and perspectives, but that equally felt the only way of carrying out this research. As such it resonated with recognition of research as a team performance (Goffman 1959) whereby researchers' actions are acknowledged to affect those of participants and the understanding of reality created between them. The approach further reflected feminist commitment to addressing power differentials characterising traditionally 'malestream' approaches, emphasising need to build rapport with research participants through empathy, compassion and mutual disclosure (Campbell et al., 2010). Research approach impacted not only on participants but also ourselves as researchers. To an extent it denied us the traditional privileged positioning of researcher as 'relatively strong and powerful, even paternalistic position in relation to the researched, as someone who has no dramaturgical qualms themselves and whose emotional self remains a 'black box' of undisputed integrity' (Atkinson and Coffey, 2003: 426). In contrast our approach placed us more in line with theorised constructions of respondents as being fragile and vulnerable. Denying ourselves such comfortable complacency, we were forced to continually reflect on and question our behaviour, including for example around concern of having disclosed too much (Scott et al., 2012). Such need for ongoing reflexivity can however be harnessed as a potential tool for ethical research practice

as ‘the researcher should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their ‘data’ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004:6). This attention to acknowledging the microethics of ordinary, everyday research practice offers the opportunity and impetus to explore ‘beneath the surface’ of the research experience (Ruch, 2014: 525).

While negotiating the spontaneous improvisation of participating in the workshops engendered challenges and transgression of comfort zones as researchers, it felt simultaneously ‘empowering to relieve ourselves of the burden of professional and competent self-presentation’ (Scott et al. 2012: 731). Central to the research was the aim to provide prisoners with opportunities to envisage different lives. For XXXX, speaking honestly about the journey through lone parenthood on benefits to becoming an academic was a story not often told in professional life for fear of slipping from role and being cast as an outsider. It felt relevant however to relay to prisoners in sharing of workshop writing, in acknowledging the often complex journeys between good and not so good times that we all travel, and that frequently emerged in the reflections of participants.

Remaining reflexively engaged by acknowledging our own experiential knowledge as a methodological resource and interpretative device (Back 2007), and identifying points of similarity with participants, must however be balanced with awareness of contrast between our experiences, and acknowledging our privilege. This tension between managing familiarity and strangeness (Ruch, 2014), conceptualised by Hammersley and Atkinson as ‘managing marginality’ (1995: 109) raises thorny questions about distance travelled in the process of becoming an academic, and the integrity of claiming points of overlap in experience with participants. As part of our critical reflection on researcher participation, we consider what the benefits and possible harms of this can be and associated ethical issues.

### ***Boundary crossing and participant effects – ethical questions***

The rich contribution participants made to the research echoed the way in which:

participants' involvement in the observational and interview processes provided the space for the practitioners to both think about their practice and also experience having their practice thought about by someone else. (Ruch, 2014: 531).

Participating fully in workshop activities alongside participants felt cathartic. As O'Neill (2012: 181) notes in relation to participatory arts research, 'telling our biographies - is a sensory, sensuous and performative experience'. To have taken part in this journey alongside participants felt like a privilege, but this immediately raised questions about equity of the transaction. What right did we as researchers have to benefit from our interactions with these men not only professionally, but also personally? Did they gain enough in return for their participation? Guillemin and Gillam have explored the ethics of much qualitative data collection as 'the creation of an unnatural social situation, introduced by a researcher, for the purpose of polite interrogation' (2004: 98), and one not usually sought out actively by participants. As feminist researchers, we have previously explored how the 'self-interested aspects of our work should not be denied', particularly as a positive impact on participants cannot be guaranteed (XXXX, 2012: 690). Indeed, Davison (2004) highlights that feminist work has potential to be especially invasive due to prizing empathy and rapport. Responsibilities around awareness of this are particularly acute for vulnerable groups such as prisoners, for whom participation in the study was one of very limited opportunities for meaningful activity and could bring considerable experienced benefits, some of which, or the extent of these, may be unanticipated.

It is important to remain aware of the potential for unintended as well as intended benefits to participants from participating in research (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), as feedback, including through the evaluative focus group discussion, suggested to be relevant in this research. Ruch (2014) discusses how research ethics invariably emphasise non-maleficence over beneficence, the majority of discussion being framed in terms of prevention of harm

rather than promotion of good. Increasing recognition has developed however around the possible benefits of participating in research (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012). Ruch (2014) discusses the centrality to carrying out social science research of a commitment to elicit positive benefits for participants including through empowerment, transformation and social change. The espoused benefits of research are most often conceptualised in terms of the wider group to which an individual participant belongs. We might consider a more directly equitable approach, particularly for disadvantaged or marginalised groups from whom we are benefitting as researchers, to also consider research benefits in terms of a more direct and tangible exchange for those individuals who participate. Where this is conceptualised it tends to be as monetary payment for time (although participatory arts methodology conceives of benefits more widely in terms of the creation of transformative knowledge, see O'Neill, 2012). While such direct financial remuneration is not possible in recompensing prisoners, the intrinsic rewards of participating emerged here as of significant value.

Research fieldnotes after one workshop relayed feelings of guilt that participants described the experience as therapeutic - an experience that we had devised to generate data. Goffman identified prisoners' telling of self-stories as a tool for navigating a way through prison life, and further the positive effect of the presence of narrative partners with whom stories are shared (Crewe and Maruna, 2006). In contrast to other studies (Crewe et al. 2014), feedback in this research did not identify participants' experiences of hearing others unloading emotionally as burdensome. Instead participants identified as positive the experience of listening to others share their feelings. This resonates with increasing recognition of the social including friendship dimension to supporting future desistance, and the potential role of such approaches as self-help and peer mentoring (Weaver, 2013). Workshops were seen not just as a quasi-therapeutic substitute for unavailable one-to-one support, but as a means of exploring feelings in a way experienced as particularly positive:

Jamie: 'It's the writing itself is what's made this group what it has, because if I was to go to a therapy group, something I've never been to, but if I was to go to a therapy

group, and everybody would sit around the table, and try and open up about things, it would be a different scenario. The things wouldn't come out that come out pen to paper.'

Stan: 'Like, I've tried counsellors and all sorts of different, like family counselling or going through my parents and that, but writing, it's like you're bringing it out of yourself, you know? So all the stuff you've got deep down, muddles up and the stuff you've stuck in and you can't get out, freewriting, it brings all your emotions out, so afterwards, like you say, you can benefit from it.'

These responses to the research process raise thorny issues for us as researchers; it is not easy to untangle experienced positive effects of participating from problematising the responsibility of asking such a vulnerable group to engage with deeply felt emotions in this way, ultimately for the ends of generating data, and without professional training in responding to the results of this (Bourne and Robson, 2013). It is argued that 'successful' qualitative research can be seen as that in which deeply personal experiences are shared (Birch and Miller, 2000), and Duncombe and Jessop (2012) identify the abilities to 'do rapport' and 'faking-friendship' as perceived 'skills' in conducting qualitative research, which shares principles and approaches with therapeutic interventions (Davison, 2004). This raises ethical issues of encouraging deep rapport around potentially distressing experiences, that may encroach on the quasi-therapeutic without due regard for consequences of this (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012). While qualitative research and researchers may share key qualities with the therapeutic context (listening, empathy, respect, seeking clarification), the essential difference is that any experienced therapeutic effect will always remain a by-product rather than the central intended outcome of research. This does not mean that researchers should ethically avoid interacting with participants at these margins where purpose and outcome are blurred, but rather a responsibility to remain critically attuned and reflexive to this. We must acknowledge that research stressing 'emancipatory collaboration

and empowerment [is] not without problems' (Davison, 2004: 380). Participants' experiences of the research process and its impact on their lives has been argued to receive too little consideration in evaluation of research (Bourne and Robson, 2013).

### **Conclusions: Deep and lasting impact**

This article has explored the role of the researcher when they are also a participant. We have done so through reflecting on research into creative writing workshops in prison, highlighting the subjectively experienced benefits of this to the imprisoned men and to us as researchers, as well as the knowledge and insight that such participation made possible. Prisoners' experiences participating in the workshops were temporally located in the past, present and future, as they drew on memories to feed their creative writing; used participation as a coping mechanism against the often hostile experience of prison life; and looked to their futures in terms of leaving prison and rebuilding previous lives and relationships. As we have identified, participants indicated the workshops to impact on understandings of pre-existing experiences and consequently informed new approaches to situations that they wished to take forward on leaving prison.

We perceived an essential aspect of our responsibility as researchers to remain attuned to possible risks to vulnerable participants of participating in the research. Such attention to critical reflection on the ethical dimension of empirical research is seen as central to informing development of a 'conceptual framework for considering how future research can be designed to enhance the research experience for *everyone* [emphasis added] involved' (Ruch, 2014: 523). What we had not anticipated was the extent to which we as researchers would experience being intrinsically involved as central protagonists in the dramaturgical performances and dilemmas emergent in the workshops, or the deep emotional impact this shared experience would have both on participating prisoners and us as researchers. This leads us to stress the importance of researchers not only acknowledging their emotions but

also working with their feelings in a potentially transformative way. Critical reflection on relational experiences such as the creative writing workshops produces knowledge and insight (O'Neill, 2012).

Among possible participation benefits conjectured when we initially developed the research were supporting literacy, self-efficacy and confidence. In recognition of the deficit of much research in apportioning sufficient attention to exploring participants' experiences of research and the impact of this on their lives (Bourne and Robson, 2013), we were keen to focus on gaining insight into such subjective reflections. Participants' accounts in workshops and the focus group identified existence of such individualised and instrumental benefits, as articulated by Conrad:

I don't know if I'm jumping the gun here... but like, just let me jump the gun. Basically, if you had to ask what people got out of this, you know, I would have to say, this was about confidence. That I will take out with me.

A further unanticipated outcome of the research was the extent to which such foreseen gains would be overshadowed by much deeper, more profound collective, emotional impact in terms of development of a shared safe space for expression of emotions and vulnerability, within and yet in contrast to the strictures of the prison regime.

Further ethical questions remain. If the symbolic construction of prison is as a space in which 'the excessive display of emotion is to be avoided at all costs' (Sykes 1958: 101), carrying 'the risk that displays of fear or hurt would be interpreted as signs of weakness, which could leave prisoners open to ridicule and exploitation' (Crewe et al. 2014: 7), then did participating in the workshops leave inmates vulnerable to the onslaught of their own memories and emotional responses within their confined environments? And to what extent was this mediated by acquisition of new tools for managing and expressing emotions? Such questions remind us that fieldwork provides only a sliver of insight into participants' complex lives. We conclude that stirring memories and emotions would have an inevitable effect

beyond the workshops but that developing ways to articulate and manage these feelings was a key benefit of participation. The workshops helped to create a critical reflective space in the prison for participants, the value of which should not be underestimated. This emphasises the importance of understanding prison as an institution with a complex geography that has different emotion zones that can be mobilised to positive ends. The benefits of utilising such potential is particularly pertinent in the context of reduced opportunities for meaningful activity in prison. Developing writing confidence offers prisoners tools to work individually and collaboratively as a means to mitigate against some of the frustrations of incarceration by expressing inner troubles and developing self-understanding. What we had not anticipated was the extent to which the workshops also offered ourselves as researchers a critical reflective space in which our largely unchoreographed interactions with the generous sharing of the prisoner participants with whom we connected also led us to tap into both old memories and new understandings of ourselves, in line with the experiences of our participants.

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<sup>1</sup> The Mass Observation Archive is based in Brighton and specialises in material about everyday life in Britain. Its eclectic holdings date from the 1930s onwards, including diaries and 'directives' on topics ranging from shopping strategies to the London Olympics. Mass Observation is a social research organisation originally founded in 1937 to 'give voice to the values expressed in the private lives of ordinary people' (Hinton, 2010:2). Following a hiatus from the mid-1960s, it was relaunched in 1981. It has a panel of volunteer writers who respond to 'directives' on different topics. These can be described as open ended questionnaires, although in practice panel members can respond to the various questions or write something inspired by the topic but not constrained by the questions. As such, the directives are examples of life-writing. 'Belonging', 'time' and 'letters' were all directive topics from the post-1981 phase of Mass Observation (2010, 1988 and 2004 respectively). The session on diaries used extracts from diaries that panel members kept during the Second World War.